

Seray Şahiner

# Basil

Sibel got out of the shower, entered the kitchen drying her hair. She turned the light on, and checked the time on her cell phone; it was almost 6. She wrapped the towel around her hair and wrung it.

*Although it would have been better if I had my hair straightened at the hair dresser, he may not show up, then there is no need to torture myself and get wrapped up in the preparation process, besides the pain of being stood up. She drew the kitchen shades. The sun was still up, but the building faced the airshaft. No matter what I do, it is always dim. It doesn't get any sunlight. The smell of eggplant coming from the oven reminded her that the dinner was almost done. She filled up a glass of water from the sink, and poured it gently on the basil pot sitting by the window, which from the look of its faded leaves was near the end of its life. She caressed its leaves, smelled the scent on her hand. This basil faded too. Basil doesn't survive in my house; I tried so many times! Even though I give it plenty of water and keep it by the window, it fades and drops its tiny little leaves. Not long ago it bloomed all of a sudden. That, I guess, was its final attempt to say "Look I am here". A sudden blooming of the basil is never a good sign...*

The oven beeped. *Huh, the eggplant is done. Murat likes it a lot.* Her hand got stuck on the handle of the hot oven while opening it. She spit on her fingers and poured water on them. She looked at her finger, the fingerprint was burned. She didn't worry too much. It would ache a bit and go away. She took the tray out of the oven with one of

the cotton pot holders. She hastily dropped the tray on the ceramic tiles because of her aching hand.

She entered the living room. She switched the places of two books that looked unorganized on the bookshelf. She arranged the CDs they would listen to that night. The time they had to spend together was already limited. She didn't want to waste it with dilemmas like, "Oh, what should we listen to, what should we eat". Her life was very much like a lovers' modified version of the phrase working mothers use to ease their conscience: "What matters is not the quantity of time spent with the child, but the quality of it.". With one difference; making their time worthwhile was not the responsibility of the side with limited time, but hers. *I am willing as long as he comes. My God, don't test my strength! Should she give him a call to say "When are you coming?" He already said "I will come," what's the point of pressuring him and making myself look desperate? After all nobody is forcing him to come. He is coming because he feels good when he is with me. Or should I have said when he is with me as well?*

She brought the appetizers she prepared yesterday, *when you make them the day before, the flavor of the olive oil really comes out. Pilaki<sup>1</sup>, dolma<sup>2</sup>, Russian salad...* Then she set the table for two. *I shouldn't sit where I face the mirror, I would keep staring. Even if it's me in the mirror, I don't want to see two women by Murat's side. She stepped back and looked at the table. It looked fine. Should I put candles? Hah! Build a fireplace too, place down a bearskin and make love on it. How romantic! This habit of assuming life to be what we see*

*in the movies... Should I have moved the house up on a mountain top as well? The woman, with her youthful body, is frozen in the snow, the man finds her and brings her to his hut, lays her on the bearskin by the fireplace, removes her trousers, massages her to increase the blood circulation. When the woman feels his hands on her thighs, she wakes up with fear, "Oh no, he will notice my cellulite!". In the meantime, she doesn't fail to regret, "I wish I used the cellulite cream I saw an advert for." When she opens her eyes, she sees the love of her life. They drink wine and make love. The room is dim. The candle light sets the mood. There is no problem until the sunrise reveals the cellulite... You don't like the romanticism in the movies, but you still want the men in them. No wonder your life is upside down.*

*It was 7 o'clock, she called Murat. Nobody answered. He is probably driving, didn't hear it. What if he doesn't come... No way! I am not being negative. He said, "I will come", he will come. What if he calls and says "I forgot that I had promised my girlfriend, I am going to her"... If he does, he goes and I will ruin them both. Like hell you ruin them! Just don't beg like, "don't ditch me, ditch her!" You loser!*

*The man will pop in any moment, and I still have my pajamas on. She put on her burgundy blouse. Should I wear jeans or a skirt? If he doesn't show up, I might get upset for having dressed up. She stood before the mirror. A herd of geese passed by the corner of her eyes and left their footprints.*

*There were mirrors everywhere in her house. It isn't out of*

arrogance; she is one of those women that speak to themselves. It's hard to tell whether there are as many mirrors in even the largest of the "Kastamonu Pide House" as in Sibel's house. She applied the foundation on her face carefully making sure not to make it look like freshly poured asphalt. *Should I play up the eyes or the lips today? She liked to draw attention to herself by accentuating one area on her face and on her body. It was one of the few aspects of her life in which she managed to be frugal. Today the focal point were the breasts. Well, we already moved past the mystery of showing the cleavage to hint at the tips...* She applied black eye liner and mascara on her eyes. She put lip gloss on her lips. She looked in the mirror, noticed that the five years of art lessons she'd taken weren't in vain.

*My name is Sibel. I have lived long enough to know that making love is not as splendid a thing as they make it out to be in the movies, that I will not kiss a gorgeous man simply because I chew mint gum, that simply because I use Axe perfume, a random guy is not going to give me flowers, that I will not turn into a tall volleyball player on a beach wearing a white bikini simply because I have on a good quality pad. As a publicist, I will not attempt to explain what this knowledge means. 10 years ago people used sweet words such as "fresh", "lively" to describe me. Five years ago they said "young lady". Now they think they compliment me by saying, "God bless! You don't look your age": I am 30 years old; The number of pencils that can be held under my breast is one, number of girdles to hold my hips in shape is five, number of padded bras is unknown.*

She joined her hands together on the table and leaned her breasts on her arms in order to rehearse whether her cleavage showed. It was moderate cleavage. It was almost 8 o'clock now. She called again. No answer. *Pig, why not call to say "I will be late"? He must be stuck in traffic, should be here soon. What if he calls and says "I can't make it." Yeah right! Something bad must have happened to him, that's why he is late. What the hell am I saying! God forbid.* She was startled with the message alert of her phone. *Where is my phone,* she checked on the couch, under the lace pillows. Not there. *Huh, it is by the window. Murat must be right outside, asking if he should buy bread.* As she was heading towards the door to buzz him in, she read the message: "20 calling credits have been added to your account." *Damn the phone company! I will sue them for emotional compensation. Is there such an article in the Turkish Criminal Code as, "giving false hopes to women anticipating a call"? If only we were living in the "Ally McBeal" tv show... I got my hopes up thinking he would say "should I buy bread?" Stupid me. This isn't his home to bring bread to!*

She entered the living room. She fixed the pillows. *It's a good sign that he didn't call. If he were not coming, he would call to make excuses. She looked at the ice on the table that was beginning to melt. He will come before the ice melts, I know. Maybe he is fighting with the girl. She may have found out about me, for instance, when I went to his house I combed my hair with her comb. A few strands of hair might have been left. I haven't done anything to purposefully break them up. But there has to be some penalty if your favorite Barış Manço3 song is "Kol Düğmeleri (Cufflinks)." Using her comb weirded me out a little, but*

even more it did to share a lover with her. Ok, yes I forgot my toothbrush in the cup as well! Her hair is auburn, I saw some hairs left on the comb. She definitely looks like a guidance counselor, I know she is a nice girl. Men can't leave the nice ones. Of course, like I am bad! It's not that, but men don't like the type that can take risks. The man never hid anything. The men that seduce women by hiding their lovers are outdated now. Nowadays they say it as it is and avoid the guilt. It's kind of the "if it suits you" mode. One doesn't need to be a semiologist in order to see these things. "I am thinking of shaving my beard, what do you say Sibel?" "I think it's nice this way," "My girlfriend says so too." Unfortunately I have had enough second woman experience to know what it means to mention the girlfriend out of the blue, or to know that he will not suddenly break up with her.

She went into the kitchen to get the pack of cigarettes. She caressed the basil as she walked by, smelled her hand. *I think the basil is hapless. That's because it can be handled easily. It endears itself right away, you fondle it and it leaves a scent on your hand. However it gives in so quickly that nobody feels the need to go back and caress it. The scent on your hand dissipates in five minutes. Nobody sends their lover basil, either a rose with thorns or an arrangement of flowers. Ostentatious wreaths are sent to weddings, even to funerals. Basil knows its destiny, knows that its magic will be lost at the first touch. It is still determined to give it another chance. As soon as it sees the sun it blossoms tiny flowers, it offers whatever it has, at the end it faces the nakedness that results from giving everything away at once. It doesn't have much left to offer. It withers. It still doesn't feign reluctance, it gives*

*in knowing what's to come. Sometimes the need for affection gets rid of the luxury of caprice.*

She lit a cigarette, separated the curtains to look at the street.

She called him again, even though it rang, she couldn't reach the person she dialed. *He will come, he promised*, she looked at the mirror, has her make-up run? *No, it's fine*. But the ice has melted long ago.

She dipped her burned hand inside the cold water in the ice bowl, it felt good. *It is 9 o'clock. If only he would leave her and marry me... He is not Alevi though, my parents would not approve. My mom would start, "Aaa, you are marrying that scamp!" Yes mother, and I will name my child*

*Muaviye!* She placed one of the cd s she'd prepared into the cd player.

She poured a glass of rakı4, this is like urine now. She took a bite of the eggplant stew. It tastes good. She called Meral. At least friends answer at first call.

- Hello... He didn't show up...

- How do you let him do this to you? We knew what he was about from the beginning, the sooner you get out of this the better, he should fuck off, was the gist of the speech she listened to.

- Why does it always end up like this? Nobody chooses me, was all she could say.

- My dear, this has nothing to do with you, the man is innately bad. No offense, but if he loved you wouldn't he have left the other girl already?

- I am hanging up, maybe he will call.

She received an information alert. She checked, full of hope, to see if the number was Murat's. *My mom called twice, that's all. Damn it!*

*They don't even give me the chance to hope: "Maybe he called when I was on the phone."*

*She looked in the mirror. It's not difficult to accept anymore, I am Sibel, the second woman. In the mean time it is nine thirty. But this is not the beginning, I have been the second woman ever since... Is he dead? Should I call his friends? If he is not dead, he will be upset that I call them. She called Meral again.*

- Hello, Meral, what if something happened to him...
- Don't be ridiculous Sibel!
- He would have called if he weren't dead!
- If we go with the logic "if he doesn't call, he must be dead", then he must be a reincarnation marvel. Don't worry he will come back to life again.
- If he is dead, with which title am I going to attend the funeral?  
You can't send a wreath saying, "from the illegal lover, with love"...
- Isn't it a prayer after all, it will get there where ever you are. Let me come if you are not feeling well.
- No, he may come. I am getting off now.

It was almost 10. The song reached the most touching part with the most kanun and violin. She looked in the mirror. Her eyes teared.

*The lipstick you put on in the evening, staying unsmudged at the end of the night can sometimes be a sign that your end is*

*approaching. Moreover: The chance of the satin underwear you bought the day before being on you the morning after you wear it, and earrings that are not removed and placed on the night stand.*

*She ate a piece of dolma. They were sitting in oil by now- You can't even imagine how tragic a plate of dolma can be. She sipped the raki. Strained yoghurt sprinkled with dill is deadly. Green beans cooked in olive oil, brain salad, chopped tomatoes can't be a 'meze' to "the person you have dialed cannot be reached at the moment message." Sliced white cheese could be an omen sometimes. If only you knew how hard it is to look at eggplant stew and not cry... "It is he who hath let loose the two seas, and hath placed between them a bar, and a bound which cannot be passed. (The Holy Qur'an – Chapter 55: Ar-Rahman)"<sup>5</sup> I wish that my tears and the water which insists "I was ice in my previous life" would imitate these words of God and not blend into one another..*

*It is my earnest desire that you never know what it is like when, even though he is reachable and available, the person you dial doesn't answer. Cleaned windows, newly washed curtains can fill one with a desire to be blind. Scum on marbles cleaned by knives, tiles scrubbed with Cif are more sorrowful than you can imagine. If you have sent a message saying "Where are you, I am worried?" to the person you have called and still have not heard anything back, there is a bigger chance that you can understand how I feel. A newly waxed body (even worse if it is full body), a perfume that is in tune with the scent of your skin can make you feel horrible.*

*There is a high probability that you are my sorrowful soul mate if you know what it means to believe in parapsychology and stare at the phone to make it ring. I am Sibel. The second woman... If you can more or less guess what's buried in those three dots, next 'hidirellez'6 I will make a wish for you to break free of your destiny. I am speaking as a person who read "You Can Heal Your Life" without believing in it, looked in the mirror (at this stage I believed it) and said "I approve of myself, everything in my life is whole and complete": When you are the second woman, it can be difficult for you to be the primary force to save yourself.*

*Don't you waste your time trying to find Freudian solutions; yes, I had a troubled father-daughter relationship. Everybody says to me, "why do you accept being the back up?" And I have always asked myself why I fall in love with men that have girlfriends or wives, why they always find me. I don't know, it has been 24 years since I have moved beyond the Freudian developmental stage.*

*We all console ourselves believing that we will find the love depicted in the movies. Until I was 25, I waited, hopeful, for the most wonderful man in the world, however he couldn't find the time while acting the lead roles in various Hollywood movies. I was the second woman even for my first lover. At first you blame yourself thinking "this is not fair to the other woman." Attempts of breaking up with the man, erasing his phone number. But if there is love involved, it ends up with the cycle of looking up the persons phone number in the directory and*

*calling him. Indifference settles in you so much that you give everything you have to offer to any man that radiates a little bit of light. Then there isn't the opportunity to use time efficiently like the other girls. Something tells you "This is your chance, offer everything you have got while you have the attention, you better impress him and win him, or he won't look back at you again." Just like the basil, all your flowers bloom as soon as you see the light, and end up stark naked. I still believed that one day I would meet a man who wants to settle down with me, who I am in love with as well, and even if he has a girlfriend, he will leave her to be with me.*

*There was this guy I liked. This time, I was going to play hard to get. I didn't sleep with him right away because I feared that he wouldn't want to see me again if I did. We finally slept together and as soon as it was over he said, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done this to you." Right then I said to myself, "Sibel, you are not 'the woman' for any man." You know those proud, free spirited kind of men, who pretend not to believe in love. Then one day they say, "There is love, I found that woman." In the life of a man, that woman is the woman. Or the one that gives the illusion of being the one... Although I am not one to talk about the correlation between love and illusion. When he apologized, I wasn't upset about losing him. Nor did I bemoan the fact that I could have seen him again if I hadn't slept with him that night. What happened was worse than losing him. If you receive an apology, it means "I lost control and slept with you, but there can't be anything more, no offense." Then there is the line "I don't want to break your heart," which is code for "don't get attached to me" meaning, "we'll sleep together but I won't*

*recognize you the next day.”*

*I won't try to justify myself. I also used to call the second women “bitch”. Did all men catch a virus, what do you want from a guy in a relationship? A home wrecker can't have a home... Over time the logic became, “If the man fell in love with someone else, the first woman should just get out of the way.” I used to believe that the man had this unbreakable bond with the first woman and that's why they can't break up; like a business passed over to the wife, a child, or a lover that can't live without him. Then I realized that these are excuses that the second woman uses to silence her pride.*

*Those of you who pity the girl because they think I am contributing to the adultery by waiting for my lover or whatever he may be, listen: every holiday, new years and vacation spent alone. Official holidays are spent with the official lover. I am illegal. I am not in any of the photographs in my lover's house; the one hugging him in the birthday picture, deciding where to put the furniture, choosing the linens isn't me. In his house I am nothing but a few strands of hair left in her comb and a toothbrush already thrown out. I am waiting for her to recognize my existence and leave him, even if he doesn't know my worth in his life.*

*A phone message came, I won't check. I don't want to know how much credit I have left. She poured another glass of rakı, the bottle was almost empty. For instance, in a movie a man is making love with a woman, the door opens, the leading woman enters, says, “how could*

*you do this to me!" She leaves before he has time to say, "I can explain."*  
*As soon as he can get himself together, he runs after victimized proud woman; nobody thinks about the woman left behind. The leading woman pulled her man out of bed, but the man has already forgotten about the woman in bed. I wonder if there is anyone besides me who feels bad for the woman left in the bed.*

*The second woman doesn't have the confidence of a woman with a guaranteed man. Being 'the back up' requires constant vigilance. The phone is always charged, you take a bath in case you see him, and to friends it's always "I'll be there if nothing comes up." You always pray to God that 'the something' does come up.*

*She checked the time on her telephone, it was quarter past 12. Without thinking, she checked the message she received earlier. "I can't come. There is something I have to take care of." Bastard, you waited till now!? She pressed the "call" button, "The person you have dialed cannot be reached at the moment."*

*She walked to the kitchen. The basil caught her eye. The poor thing is just like me. She put the basil in the shade. So it doesn't give everything and fade thinking it has found a place to belong when it feels that bit of light that comes once in a life time...*

1 Pilaki is a Turkish appetizer which is a bean dish cooked in olive oil, served cold.

2 Dolma is a family of stuffed vegetable dishes in Turkish cuisine and the cuisines of the former Ottoman Empire and surrounding regions, including, Albania, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Armenia, the Levant, the Balkans, Greece, Iraq, Iran and Central Asia. Perhaps the bestknown

is the grape-leaf dolma, which is more precisely called yaprak dolma or sarma.

Common vegetables to stuff include zucchini, eggplant, tomato and pepper. The stuffing may

include meat or not. Meat dolma are generally served warm, often with sauce; meatless ones

are generally served cold. Both can be eaten along with yoghurt.

3 Barış Manço (also spelt Baris Mancho in some European album releases) (January 2, 1943 - February 1, 1999) was a Turkish singer, composer, television producer and celebrity.

He composed about 200 songs, some of which were translated into a variety of languages including English, Japanese, Greek, Bulgarian, Romanian, Persian and Arabic.

4 Rakı is an anise-flavored aperitif in Turkey. It is the unofficial 'national drink' and it is traditionally drunk mixed with water; the dilution causes this alcoholic drink to turn a milkywhite

color.

5 Sale, George. The Koran: Commonly Called the Alcoran of Mohammed. Philadelphia: J.W.

Moore, 1856

6 Hıdırellez is a traditional holiday celebrated on the 6th of May. It is believed that on that day

the prophets Hızır and Ilyas met.